

ICG

INTERNATIONAL CINEMATOGRAPHERS GUILD

MAGAZINE

**NEW
TECHNOLOGY
ISSUE**

APRIL 2017

GHOST IN THE SHELL

THE HANDMAID'S TALE • THE OA
SUNDANCE 2017

NUN BUT THE BEST

From DP's to assistants, Sundance 2017 stands out as the year of the female camera team member. Here are three outstanding stories.

by Laretta Prevost



► CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

Quyen Tran

(The Little Hours, Deidra & Laney Rob a Train)

portrait by Sara Terry

Hillary Spera

(Band Aid)

portrait by Sarah Shatz

Kat Westergaard

(Novitiate)

portrait by Sarah Shatz



The Little Hours

“**THE THING I LOVE ABOUT INDIE FILMMAKING IS YOU’RE FORCED TO BE INNOVATIVE AND CAN’T EVER BE LAZY.**”

— **QUYEN TRAN**



Deidra & Laney Rob a Train

QUYEN TRAN had two films debut at Sundance – *The Little Hours*, in the Midnight Section, and *Deidra & Laney Rob a Train*, in NEXT. *The Little Hours* is a capricious comedy that follows three medieval nuns (Alison Brie, Aubrey Plaza, and Kate Micucci) who spend their days using modern language to whine about monastic culture. That’s until their pastor (John C. Reilly) quits their mother superior (Molly Shannon) long enough to bring home a gardener (Dave Franco), who is introduced as a deaf-mute in an unsuccessful attempt to protect the lad against the nuns’ sexual drives.

Tran says she didn’t know “exactly where things would go, blocking-wise,” given that director Jeff Baena “wanted to shoot right away because the actors are brilliant improvisers. I’d traditionally start off with a wide master, as a lot of comedy is situation-based or related to hand movement.”

Shooting wider frames meant lighting wider spaces. Considering the film used nineteen locations on a tight, twenty-day schedule and was based not so much on a script as much as an 18-page outline, Tran’s approach was to take meticulous notes on the tech scout and base a shooting schedule around the sun.

“I drew diagrams of the direction of the sun because I didn’t know what the scene was going to be about,” she recounts. “A scene would read, ‘Naked ladies around a bonfire. A character runs and everyone freaks out,’” she laughs. “It was very taxing, in a good way. The thing I love about indie filmmaking is it really makes you pay attention. You’re forced to be innovative and can’t ever be lazy.”

Tran used an ARRI AMIRA 3.8K UHD and Angénieux zoom lenses, 24-290 mm and 28-76 mm, and Cooke S4 primes. She was joined by 1st AC Alexandra Cason and 2nd AC Vanessa Ward. Tran says Cason, who has been working with her for eight years, “really wants to put the film

first. [Cason] pays attention to the story. I’m always bouncing ideas off her, and I really value her input as a filmmaker.”

The Little Hours is a sumptuous period piece, filled with soft daylight that bathes all three female leads as they dish on everyone and slow zoom shots that add to the awkward hilarity. *Deidra & Laney Rob a Train* takes an entirely different visual approach, with bright pop art colors filling the present-day story about a teenager forced to provide for her younger brother and sister (along with saving money for college) when her mother is jailed for throwing a big-screen TV outside her job at a Big Box store. The super-smart high-schooler turns to robbing boxed merchandise from trains as they pass her backyard, aided by her sibling, Laney, and deadbeat dad.

Being a Netflix original, Tran had to capture in 4K, so she opted for the RED EPIC DRAGON. “I knew I’d be keying night scenes with flashlights and headlamps, so I did flare tests, and really liked the Cooke S4 primes,” she recalls. “I researched with the prop master to find out which headlamps [used when Deidra and Laney board the trains each night] would give what output. Sometimes I would ND the headlamp, and I’d use flashlights in the shot to bounce off the back of a cardboard box.”

The wide shots of the exterior night scenes were shot on a real moving train, while close and interior boxcar scenes were done on a static train. To sell that the characters were indeed in the middle of a daring maneuver, the camera was handheld and shot from a low angle to avoid the non-moving ground, and a crewmember operated a fan to create a gusting wind effect. Safety was of utmost importance to the crew. One area of education for Tran was (with only minimal lighting) designing shots and angles that would sell the girls actually jumping onto a moving train, in collaboration with the stunt coordinator and stuntwomen.

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FEMALE DP COLLECTIVES PROVIDE VISIBILITY AND COMMUNITY

by Laretta Prevost

“People can’t reason that, ‘I would love to hire a woman, I just don’t know where to find one,’” observes Guild member Autumn Eakin, creator of www.CinematographersXX.com, a website of professional female DPs that includes award-winning pioneers like Nancy Schreiber, ASC, and Ellen Kuras, ASC. Eakin says CXX offers a practical solution to that quandary by showcasing the reels of dozens of experienced female shooters. Another new group – the International Collective of Female Cinematographers (www.icfcfilm.com), founded by Kristin Fieldhouse and Rose Fadem-Johnston – boasts the reels of well over 100 female cinematographers, providing community support and industry advocacy. Both CXX and ICFC have active public Facebook groups (along with private groups), which results in a shared spreadsheet listing of recommended camera and lighting crew who identify as female.

“People hire or mentor people who remind them of themselves, and if it’s mostly straight white men in charge, they end up hiring more people like them,” reflects Laura Hudock (ICG November, 2016), who contributed key footage to the Sundance 2017 documentary *Trumped*. Eakin agrees, adding that “getting women in a position of power changes everything. Hiring practices trickle down.”

Dagmar Weaver-Madsen, whose breakthrough VR project, *Through You*, debuted at Sundance’s 2017 New Frontier section, recently attended a meeting of Local 600’s Eastern Region Women’s Forum, co-chaired by Meg Kettell and Deborah Brozina and held at the home of DP/director Ellen Kuras, who brought the Web pilot *When the Streetlights Go On* to Sundance 2017. It was at that meeting that Weaver-Madsen became aware of a new term. “However progressive you may be, it’s hard to recognize unconscious bias, which we are all guilty of to some degree,” she describes. “There’s the superficial level – gender, age, race – but even humor and other things that make people bond are often derived from socioeconomic backgrounds, so it’s complicated to pull the unconscious bias out and challenge yourself to bond with someone new.”

“I have seen men with less experience move up more quickly than me,” adds Hillary Spera (*Band Aid*, Sundance 2017). “I definitely feel that as a woman I’ve had to have twice the resume for the same job.”

Hudock says that she tends to be “hired by someone who is more sympathetic to the need to hire women and minorities, than people

who have had it a little easier. I had a good body of work, and the visibility provided by The New York Times’ covering CXX helped me book *Circus*, which led to *Trumped*.”

In the last 30 years, female membership in unions as a whole has risen dramatically, from 33 percent to above 45 percent. IATSE Local 600 has lagged behind the national average with a 13.5 percent female membership, and separating out just for DPs, female membership drops even further to 4.9 percent. As a result, the Guild has, in the past year, funneled intense resources toward closing this gender gap, including designating a full-time staff person dedicated to the issue, offering unconscious (implicit) bias training for its National Executive Board members, updating its Diversity Directory and providing assistance to producers looking to hire more-diverse crews.

Weaver-Madsen admits to being surprised by “the low number of women who were listed as DP’s in the union roster,” when she joined Local 600. But she notes: “I was still very proud to join them.” Longtime indie DP Rachel Morrison, whose acclaimed 2017 feature *Mudbound* was her eighth project at Sundance, is currently shooting the big-budget *Black Panther* but says that it’s rare for a woman to be shooting a movie of that size. Kat Westergaard, who joined the Guild on her recent Sundance award-winning film *Novitiate*, says it’s common for female DP’s to work smaller budgeted films.

“*Novitiate* cost 5.5 million dollars, and I had the time, proper crew, and lighting that I wanted,” Westergaard reflects. “On smaller movies you get what you get, and you do your best to make it look good. Having a little bit of money made it so much easier.”

Kuras says such realities “parallel the same story of women not getting parity in the workplace in terms of pay.” And the idea that, “I don’t care what someone’s gender is, I’ll just hire who is best for the job,” she adds, doesn’t take into consideration the social complexities and the differences in opportunities offered that result in most union members’ knowing more men than women. When those in hiring positions make an effort to seek out more female crew members [as in Ryan Murphy’s new Half Foundation] considering females for jobs 50 percent of the time, inadvertent sexism will stop being perpetuated.

“It’s important to hire the right person for the job,” Spera concludes. “And it is also important to consider what you can do to further the cause of gender equality.” 



Band Aid

HILLARY SPERA lit and lensed *Band Aid*, a dramedy about a married couple (Zoe Lister-Jones and Adam Pally) stalled in their careers and relationship. In an effort to “sing it out,” they start a band with their weirdo neighbor (David Armisen).

To make a point about gender diversity in the camera department, director Lister-Jones hired an all-female crew, which she found to be supportive and nurturing. Co-star Pally says having an all-women crew was one of the best experiences of his life.

“I have a daughter, and often you just don’t see women doing different jobs in the movies – setting the lighting or holding the camera. It was really amazing for me to see, every day, all these different versions of what my daughter could be.”

“Everyone was such a team player, there was no ego,” Spera adds. “Women relate to each other in an intuitive way and are so good at multitasking.”

Band Aid drove a tight schedule, shooting four to five locations a day. Spera tackles such timelines by spending as much time as possible with a director before the shoot, looking at references to develop a common language, shot-listing, and “over-preparing.” She lit from outside the house to enable faster turn-around times, and to portray her subjects in a natural and flattering light.

Considering the small spaces and practical locations, an ARRI AMIRA fit the bill as a light and mobile camera for the all-handheld project. Vintage Cooke glass was used to invoke 1970s films shot on celluloid, as many of the movie’s filmic references focused on couples dueling it out decades before.



Band Aid

“**IT WAS REALLY AMAZING TO SEE, EVERY DAY, ALL THESE DIFFERENT VERSIONS OF WHAT MY DAUGHTER COULD BE.**”

**– CO-STAR ADAM PALLY
ON BAND AID’S ALL FEMALE CREW**



Novitiate

KAT WESTERGAARD was able to go into her film, *Novitiate* (also set in a convent but from a more serious perspective), with a strong amount of prep, as she and director Maggie Betts knew they'd be shooting the film throughout Betts' year of research.

"We're creative partners," Westergaard shares. "It's not like there was a script and just four weeks of prep. Prep came slowly, looking at images, seeing little movie clips." Betts wanted *Novitiate* to have a formal, composed look. The film, set in the 1960s, follows a young woman (Margaret Qualley) studying to be a nun as she, her fellows, and the Reverend Mother (Melissa Leo) struggle with questions of faith, sexuality, and a changing church following Vatican II.

"Lighting-wise, it's a moody film," Westergaard describes. "I'd go into a room at different periods in the day and pick what I thought looked the nicest. I'd bring the gaffer back and then we'd try to recreate what we saw by somewhat tenting the windows and mostly lighting from outside." Other than A-camera 1st AC Scott Johnson (from L.A.), Westergaard used a local Nashville crew. She describes the entire team [A-camera operator David Mellow, A-camera 2nd AC Tracy Facelli, B-camera operator Armanda Costanza, who moved up during the shoot from B-camera 1st AC with Erin Naifeh taking over as B-camera 1st, B-camera 2nd AC Heather Murphy, and additional AC's Cole Carpenter and Tiffany Murray] as "collaborative, kind and hard-working."

One challenge Westergaard encountered was related to costuming: shooting faces surrounded by iridescent white cloth above black dresses and dark backgrounds. And visual inspiration included turn-of-the-century painters – portraits against wood and dark settings. To address this, Westergaard shot ARRIRAW, which took a chunk of the budget but provided zero compression and hence more information on the sensor and more latitude to draw

upon in post. "I lit softly so the white headdresses didn't pick up too much light," she concludes. "Often a special light would be used on the bodies of the outfits to pull the black of the dresses away from the dark background."

All three DPs offer frank reflections on being a female DP. "I'd love to shoot thrillers and sci-fi, but I don't get those scripts," Westergaard reveals. "I don't know if that's because women aren't writing them or because the men who are making them don't know if women are capable."

"A dream for me is that it's just a really open forum," adds Spera. "Everyone has the opportunity, and we're all equal, and we're all up for jobs."

Both Westergaard and Tran are mothers, which can be challenging for a DP. Union health coverage extends as long as one is working, which makes maternity leave a complicated process; both women said they have been passed over for jobs due to having children. At the ASC awards, in Los Angeles, in February [where Nancy Schreiber, ASC, was the first female cinematographer bestowed with the organization's prestigious Presidents Award], a common theme was honorees thanking their loved ones for supporting careers that often directed more time to filmmaking than home life.

Tran says one fun part of her Sundance experience was getting to meet a number of other female DPs, both when she spoke at a Canon panel and at a party hosted by Cinematographers XX, a group to which Westergaard and Spera also belong.

"DP's don't get to hang out with other DP's because there's only one DP on set," Tran reflects. "I've met so many female DP's since the inception of these different [female cinematographer groups – see sidebar]; it's a pure joy." 